

Message Text

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FM SECSTATE WASHDC

TO AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

C O N F I D E N T I A L STATE 040102

STADIS////////////////////////////////////

LIMDIS

FOL RPT DAMASCUS 878 ACTION SECSTATE 18 FEB.

QUOTE

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 878

STADIS

LIMDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS, SY

SUBJ: CONDITION OF SYRIAN JEWS

REF: STATE 35801

1. SUMMARY: OUR DIRECT AND INDIRECT CONTACTS WITH
SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY OF APPROXIMATELY 4,700 PEOPLE
INDICATE PROGRESS BEING MADE TO REDUCE REMAINING AREAS
OF OFFICIALLY DIRECTED DISCRIMINATION AGAINST JEWISH
COMMUNITY. COMMUNITY LEADERS HAVE ESTABLISHED CHANNELS
OF COMMUNICATION WITH SARG TO EXPRESS THEIR GRIEVANCES WHICH
THEY ARE USING TO PRESS FOR AMELIORATION OF INTERNAL TRAVEL
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RESTRICTIONS AND RELIGION IDENTIFICATION ON IDENTITY DOCUMENTS.

IN ADDITION, JEWS ARE PERMITTED STUDY AT SYRIAN UNIVERSITIES;
SOME BUSINESSMEN GRANTED EXPORT-IMPORT LICENSES, PROPERTY
CAN BE SOLD IF REPLACEMENT PURCHASED, TRAVEL ABROAD
PERMITTED IN SOME CASES UPON POSTING BOND, SOME DAMASCUS
JEWS ARE ESTABLISHING THEIR RESIDENCES OUTSIDE JEWISH QUARTER,
AND THEIR COMMERCIAL AND PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES THRIVING. END
SUMMARY.

2. OVER PAST FEW MONTHS, EMBASSY HAS HAD OPPORTUNITY
THROUGH DIRECT AND INDIRECT CONTACTS TO ACQUIRE CONSIDERABLE
AMOUNT OF INFORMATION ON STATUS AND CONDITIONS OF LIFE
OF SYRIA'S APPROXIMATELY 4,700 JEWS. (BASED ON FIGURES
DERIVED FROM JEWISH SOURCES, WE ESTIMATE DAMASCUS
COMMUNITY POPULATION AT 2,900, ALEPPO 1,300 AND QAMISHLE
500.) WE HAVE REPORTS THAT MEMBERS OF THESE SYRIAN
JEWISH COMMUNITIES ARE INCREASINGLY TAKING MORE ACTIVE ROLE
IN SEEKING TO REDUCE REMAINING AREAS OF OFFICIAL DISCRIMINATIVN
AGAINST SYRIAN JEWS, AND FEEL SOME CONFIDENCE THAT BARRIERS
BETWEEN THEM AND THEIR FELLOW SYRIANS ARE DISSIPATING AS WELL.
DAMASCUS JEWISH COMMUNITY LEADERS HAVE ESTABLISHED CONTACTS
WITH SYRIAN AUTHORITIES WHICH SOME OF THEM BELIEVE
SERVE AS EFFECTIVE CHANNELS TO FUNNEL INTO TOP LEVEL
OF SARG FOR COMMUNITY REQUESTS THAT COMMUNITY THEIR GRIEVANCES
BE AMELIORATED. THEIR CONCERN FOCUSES ON THREE ISSUES:
PROHIBITION ON EMIGRATION, RESTRICTIONS ON INTERNAL TRAVEL,
AND SPECIAL STAMPS ON THEIR SYRIAN ID CARDS IDENTIFYING
THEM AS JEWS. THOSE AREAS OF DISCRIMINATION APPARENTLY CONSIDERED
IRRITATING BUT TOLERABLE BY JEWISH COMMUNITY AT PRESENT
INCLUDE REGULATION OF PROPERTY SALES, LIMITED OPPORTUNITIES
FOR GOVERNMENT EMPLOYMENT AND NEED TO COORDINATE SOME ACTIONS --
SUCH AS UNIVERSITY ENTRY -- WITH SARG BUREAUCRACY.

3. SOURCES WITHIN COMMUNITY INFORM US THAT EXCESS OF
MARRIAGEABLE WOMEN OVER MEN IS CONSIDERED MAJOR PROBLEM
RESULTING FROM LACK OF PROGRESS ON EMIGRATION ISSUE.
MURDER OF FOUR JEWISH GIRLS IN 1974 WHO TRIED ESCAPE
SYRIA STILL FRESH IN PEOPLE'S MINDS. THAT TRAGEDY, TOGETHER
WITH UNATTRACTIVENESS OF LEBANON AS WAY STATION DUE TO
DETERIORATION BEGINNING LAST YEAR OF LEBANESE LAW AND ORDER, ARE
PROBABLY MAIN REASON ILLEGAL EMIGRATION HAS APPARENTLY
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STOPPED FOR PAST YEAR.HON MORE POSITIVE SIDE OF LEDGER
HOPES OF SOME IN COMMUNITY THAT PROGRESS MADE SO FAR
IN REDRESSING SPECIFIC GRIEVANCES CAN BE FURTHER IMPROVED UPON
IN FUTURE MAY HAVE ACTED TO RESTRAIN THEM
FROM RISKING USE OF "UNDERGROUND RAILWAY".

4. COMMUNITY LEADERS HAVE POINTED OUT TO AUTHORITIES THAT
FORMAL PERMISSION NEEDED FOR INTERNAL TRAVEL IS VIRTUALLY

AUTOMATIC. THEY BELIEVE THAT PERMIT REQUIREMENT MAY BE DROPPED ALTOGETHER BY SARG IN NEAR FUTURE; TRAVEL OUTSIDE SYRIA GRANTED IN SOME CASES FOR MEDICAL, TOURISM OR BUSINESS REASONS AND AFTER POSTING OF BOND, USUALLY IN AMOUNT OF 25,000 L.S. (US \$6,850) (WE HAVE ISSUEDS SOME VISAS PAST YEAR AS HAVE OTHER EMBASSIES. ITALIANS, FOR EXAMPLE, HAVE ISSUED FOUR TRAVEL VISAS FOR SYRIAN JEWS); COMMUNITY SAYS THERE IS SOME HOPE THAT REFERENCES TO RELIGION MAY BE ERASED FROM THEIR ID CARDS IF SARG APPROVES PETITION TO THIS EFFECT (REMOVAL OF SUCH DETAIL IS NOW THE NORM FOR OTHER RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN SYRIA BUT EXCEPTIONS STILL COME TO OUR ATTENTION); REQUEST FOR EXPANDED LIST OF JEWISH MERCHANTS ABLE TO RECEIVE IMPORT/EXPORT LICENSES HAS ALSO BEEN SUBMITTED TO SARG FOR CONSIDERATION; JEWISH STUDENTS ARE ABLE TO ATTEND DAMASCUS UNIVERSITY, ALTHOUGH THEY MUST RECEIVE PERMISSION FROM INTERIOR MINISTRY (APPROXIMATELY THIRTY-FIVE NOW PURSUING THEIR STUDIES, AND STUDENTS HAVE BEEN GRADUATING REGULARLY, INDICATING UNIVERSITY STUDY IS NOT OPTION ONLY RECENTLY GRANTED TO JEWS).

NLKNOWLEDGE OF AVERAGE SYRIAN ABOUT CONDITIONS OF SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY IS GENERALLY ACCURATE BUT LACKING INSIGHT INTO UNDERLYING PSYCHOLOGY OF COMMUNITY HOPES AND FEARS. SYRIANS BELIEVE THEIR JEWISH COMPATRIOTS HAVE MANAGED TO PARTICIPATE IN OVERALL UPSWING IN SYRIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SINCE ADVENT OF ASAD REGIME -- PERCEPTION WHICH EMBASSY HAS NO EVIDENCE TO CONTRADICT -- AND ARE FOND OF REFERRING TO JEWISH MERCHANT, DOCTOR OR LAWYER WITH WHOM THEY ROUTINELY DEAL OFTEN WITH EXCLAMATION THAT "I DID NOT EVEN KNOW HE WAS A JEW WHEN I FIRST MET HIM." JEWS THEMSELVES FREELY ADMIT THAT FOURTEEN DAMASCUS COMMUNITY DOCTORS

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COULD NOT REMAIN IN BUSINESS WITHOUT THEIR NON-JEWISH PATIENTS, WHO COMPRISE BULK OF THEIR PRACTICE; SIX KOSHER BUTCHERS IN DAMASCUS RELY SO MUCH ON NON-JEWISH CUSTOMERS THAT AT LEAST ONE HAS ESTABLISHED HIS SHOP IN CHRISTIAN QUARTER OF CITY; AND ONE OF THREE DAMASCUS JEWISH LAWYERS CATERS ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY TO MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN CLIENTS AND HAS NON-JEWISH LAW PARTNER. SOME CHRISTIANS EXPRESS TO US APPREHENSION SIMILAR TO THAT FELT BY SOME MEMBERS OF JEWISH COMMUNITY THAT TOLERABLE AND GENERALLY IMPROVING CONDITIONS MIGHT NOT LAST. THEY PROFESS THEIR FEARS THAT PRESENT MINORITY ALAWITE GOVERNMENT, SENSITIVE TO MINORITY CONCERNS, MIGHT BE REPLACED AT ANY TIME BY REGIME LESS INTERESTED IN HEEDING REQUEST OF JEWISH COMMUNITY.

6. TO SOME EXTENT LACK OF DEPTH IN PERCEPTIONS OF EVEN EDUCATED SYRIANS ABOUT CONDITIONS IN JEWISH COMMUNITY REFLECTIVE OF BASICALLY CONFESSIONAL SOCIETY IN WHICH MEMBERS OF EACH RELIGIOUS GROUP GENERALLY CLOSE RANKS TOGETHER TO HELP COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND IGNORE CONDITIONS OF OUTSIDERS. SYRIAN JEWS ARE NOT CONFINED TO RESIDENCE IN TRADITIONAL JEWISH QUARTER. DETERMINATION OF SOME YOUNGER COUPLES TO RESIDE OUTSIDE JEWISH QUARTER AND OF YOUNG DENTIST TO RENT SHOP/RESIDENCE AWAY FROM COMMUNITY STRIKES US AS ILLUSTRATIVE OF WILLINGNESS SOME JEWS TO OVERCOME THEIR FEARS AND ESTABLISH STRONGER BONDS WITH NON-JEWISH SYRIAN SOCIETY. EMBASSY ALSO BELIEVES THAT THE VARIOUS EXPRESSIONS OF US CONCERN FOR COMMUNITY HAVE HELPED SENSITIZE SARG TO FACT IT HAS A PROBLEM WITH WHICH IT MUST DEAL.

7. JEWISH COMMUNITY DOES NOT SEEM DEEPLY CONCERNED ABOUT LACK OF PROGRESS IN SECURING EMPLOYMENT WITHIN SARG. THEY ATTRIBUTED THIS TO LOW GOVERNMENT SALARIES VS. OPPORTUNITIES IN PRIVATE SECTOR. SENSITIVE POSITIONS IN MILITARY/SECURITY/INTELLIGENCE FIELDS ARE FORBIDDEN THEM, AND IN ANY CASE USUALLY FILLED BY INDIVIDUALS ON ACTIVE MILITARY DUTY STATUS. (JEWS ARE NOT ACCEPTED INTO SYRIAN ARMY.)

8. IN CONCLUSION, THROUGH OUR CONTACTS WITH PEOPLE LIKE
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CBS NEWSMAN MIKE WALLACE AND HIS STAFF WHO HAVE RECENTLY PROBED DEEPLY INTO SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY AS WELL AS OUR OWN EFFORTS AND GLEANINGS FROM LOCAL SOURCES, WE CONSIDER THAT JEWS IN DAMASCUS AT LEAST ARE BECOMING READIER TO BRING THEIR CONCERNS OVER DISCRIMINATORY ACTIONS AFFECTING THEIR COMMUNITY TO ATTENTION OF SARG. COMMUNITY EXPRESSES HOPE THAT POLICY OF INCREMENTAL IMPROVEMENTS WILL GRADUALLY LEAD TO EASING OF RESTRICTIONS, EVEN IN EMIGRATION AREA. THEIR DEPENDENCE UPON NON-JEWISH COMMERCIAL AND PROFESSIONAL CLIENTELE HAS HELPED MOVE THEM INTO SYRIAN ECONOMIC MAINSTREAM. AT SAME TIME, THEY HAVE NO REAL INDEPENDENT POWER BASE WITHIN SYRIA FROM WHICH THEY CAN PRESSURE REGIME INTO FURTHER IMPROVEMENTS IN REGULATIONS GOVERNING THEIR STATUS. THEY CAN ONLY IMPORTUNE THAT PRESIDENT THROUGH ESTABLISHED SECURITY CHANNELS AND SEEK REDRESS AT HIS SUFFERANCE. THEIR PERSECUTION HAS ENDED; THE REGIME TOLERATES NO ROUGH HANDLING OF THEM OR ANY OTHER MINORITY AS A GROUP. THEY ARE FATALISTIC ABOUT THE FUTURE AND SOME AT LEAST WOULD WELCOME THE CHANCE TO LEAVE SYRIA.

9. DEPT. PLEASE PASS OTHER POSTS AS DESIRED.

MURPHY

UNQUOTE INGERSOLL

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